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New Path

How former inmates find their way back into the workforce.

[Abstract]

Anthony Bustos started to work for Pit Stop, San Francisco's public toilet program, last year, about six months after his release from a California state prison. The 43-year-old had spent 22 years behind bars for murder. When he went in, he said he was "a very antisocial person." When he was 19, he was heavily involved in street gangs, selling and doing drugs, drinking alcohol, and committing crimes. But in prison he began to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, which helped him recover from his drinking problem. Now he wanted to be "prosocial," to get a job, to give back to the community. He says getting the job gave him the opportunity to do that. On the street in the Mission District where he works, he meets people who have struggles similar to the ones he had, alcoholics and drug addicts. He says he knows how to talk to them and calm them down. He understands what they're going through.

Every year in California, about 35,000 people are released from state prisons. Many of them are taking jobs wherever they can get them, struggling to start over. Getting a job after many years behind bars is not easy. Many former inmates lack skills and work experience. Some prisons have robust job training programs, but only a handful of prisons make a real investment in that area. Moreover, criminal history historically has been a barrier to employment. There have been some legislative changes to help inmates, but many employers aren't aware of them.

Having a job is closely related to whether a former inmate will commit another crime and be returned to prison. Yet half of former inmates have no income a year after their release, according to the Brookings Institution. Nearly half (46.1%) of former inmates are convicted of a felony or misdemeanor offense within three years of their release from state prisons, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). However, CDCR doesn't track the employment of former prisoners. Only a few small-scale studies show their struggles.

Several programs offer transitional jobs to help former inmates rebuild their lives. One such program is the Pit Stop program, where Bustos found opportunity. The program began in 2014

after a community budget hearing. San Francisco Public Works partnered with two nonprofit organizations to staff the city's public toilets as part of a workforce development program. The Pit Stop aimed not only to solve the community problem but also to create a pipeline for people trying to re-enter the workforce. Most Pit Stop attendants are former inmates. The program now operates at 25 locations with an annual budget of \$3.1 million, and about 150 employees.

This multimedia journalism project consists of a text story, video, photos, and data visualization. The news package shows how former inmates start over, and the challenges they face. I reported, wrote text, visualized data, and shot some of the video footage.

[Source List]

Interviews:

Anthony Bustos, attendant of Pit Stop

Lovett Milton, attendant of Pit Stop

Yvonne Michael, attendant of Pit Stop

Derrick Engelman, supervisor of Pit Stop

Harvey Turner, supervisor of Pit Stop

Lorenzo Grant, supervisor of Pit Stop

Nadon King, supervisor of Pit Stop

Hanif Hakeem, supervisor of Pit Stop

Mohammed Nuru, director of San Francisco Public Works

Rachel Gordon, director of policy & communications of San Francisco Public Works

Lena Miller, founder and co-executive director of Hunters Point Family

Ron Wilson, chief operating officer of Hunters Point Family

Christian Martin, executive director of Lower Polk Community Benefit District

Lonnie Tuck, Regional Director of Oakland's Center for Employment Opportunities office

Jasper Burroughs, outreach specialist of Oakland's Center for Employment Opportunities office

Katherine Katcher, founder and executive director of Root & Rebound

Deric Washington, senior legal fellow of Root & Rebound

K.C. Taylor, associate director of California Legal Services

Lawrence Robinson, mentor volunteer coordinator of Rubicon program

Michelle Walker, participant of Rubicon Program

Tommy Tinsley, participant of Rubicon Program

Vinuta Naik, staff attorney of East Bay Community Law Center

Jael Myrick, program coordinator of East Bay Community Law Center

David Harding, professor of sociology at UC Berkeley

Online Sources:

- [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation website](https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/victim_services/sentencing.html#WHAT_IS_PAROLE)

https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/victim_services/sentencing.html#WHAT_IS_PAROLE

- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “[Offender Data Points \(2017\)](https://sites.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2018/07/Offender-Data-Points-as-of-December-31-2017-1.pdf)”

<https://sites.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2018/07/Offender-Data-Points-as-of-December-31-2017-1.pdf>

- [California Department of Fair Employment and Housing website](https://www.dfeh.ca.gov/resources/frequently-asked-questions/criminalhistoryinfoinemploymentfaqs/)

<https://www.dfeh.ca.gov/resources/frequently-asked-questions/criminalhistoryinfoinemploymentfaqs/>

- [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, “2018 Recidivism Report \(2019\)”](https://sites.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2019/01/2018-Recidivism-Report.pdf)

<https://sites.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2019/01/2018-Recidivism-Report.pdf>

- [California Legislative Information website](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2138)

https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2138

- Center for Employment Opportunities, “[Improving Long-Term Employment Outcomes: Promising Findings from New York State \(2019\)](https://ceoworks.org/assets/images/CEO-Improving-Long-Term-Employment_030719.pdf)”

https://ceoworks.org/assets/images/CEO-Improving-Long-Term-Employment_030719.pdf

- National Conference of State Legislatures, “[License Overload? \(State Legislatures Magazine, April 2018\)](http://www.ncsl.org/bookstore/state-legislatures-magazine/occupational-licensing-can-balance-safety-and-employment-opportunities.aspx)”

<http://www.ncsl.org/bookstore/state-legislatures-magazine/occupational-licensing-can-balance-safety-and-employment-opportunities.aspx>

- National Conference of State Legislatures, “[Barriers to Work: Improving Employment in Licensed Occupations for Individuals with Criminal Records \(2018\)](http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/Labor/Licensing/criminalRecords_v06_web.pdf)”

http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/Labor/Licensing/criminalRecords_v06_web.pdf

- [New York State’s Department of Labor website](https://www.labor.ny.gov/careerservices/work-for-success/overview.shtm#_blank)

https://www.labor.ny.gov/careerservices/work-for-success/overview.shtm#_blank

- [Project Return website](https://www.projectreturninc.org)

<https://www.projectreturninc.org>

- Safe Return Project, “[Community Reintegration and Employment in Contra Costa County \(2013\)](https://pacinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/reintegration-employment-final.pdf)”

<https://pacinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/reintegration-employment-final.pdf>

- [Safer Foundation website](https://saferfoundation.org/How-We-Help/Workforce-Development/Transitional-Employment)

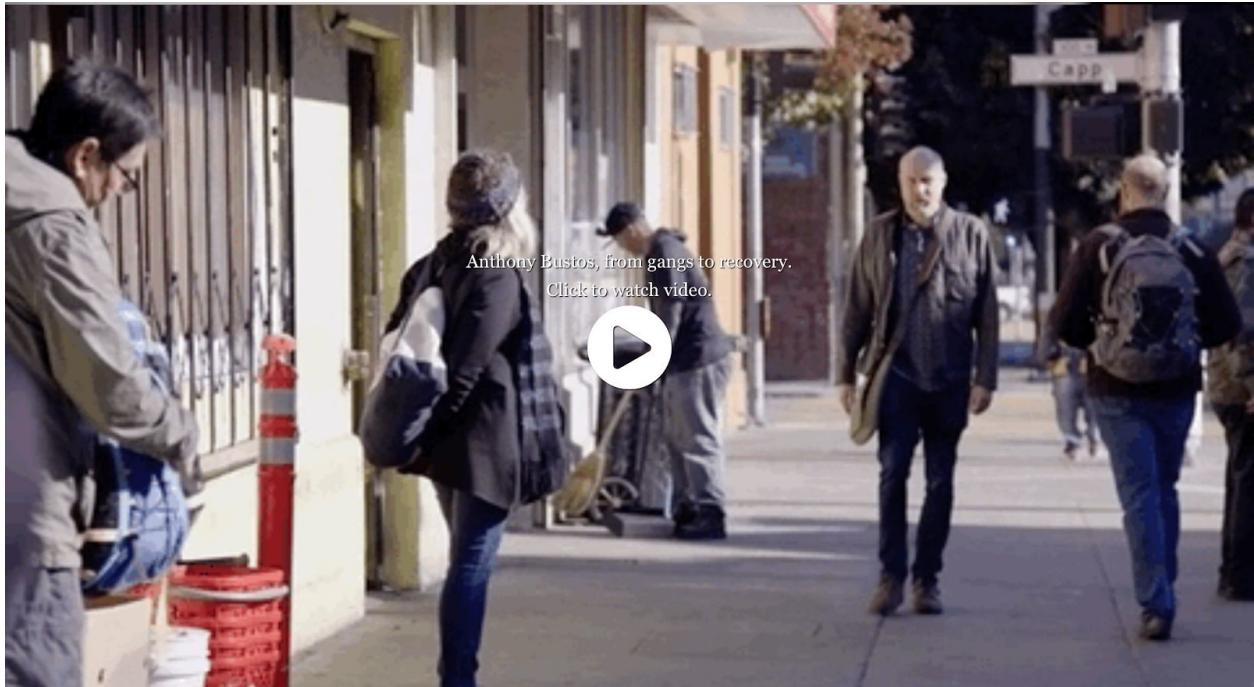
<https://saferfoundation.org/How-We-Help/Workforce-Development/Transitional-Employment>

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, showing several dark, intricate tattoos on the fingers and palm. The hand is positioned with fingers slightly spread, and the background is blurred, showing what appears to be a public restroom sign.

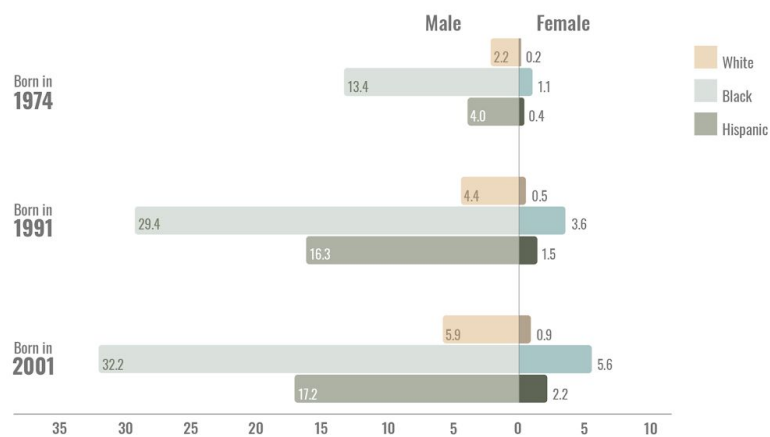
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San Francisco residents and tourists may not know that the men and women helping them at public toilets along city streets could have been behind bars just weeks or months before. How one program helps former inmates find their way back into the workforce.

*Text by Saemmool Lee
Videos by Yingshan Deng*

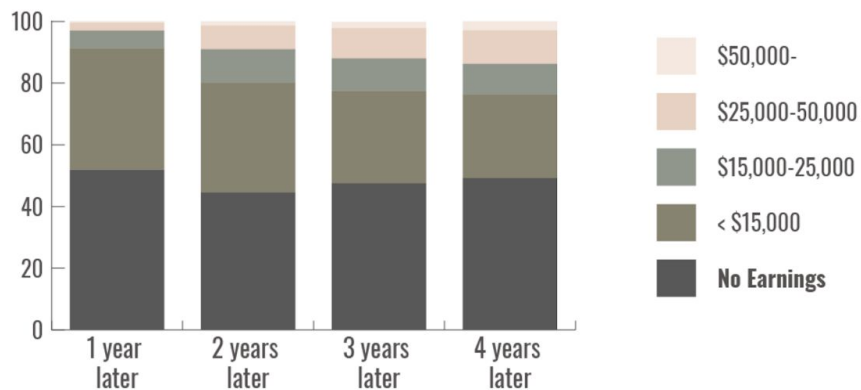


Likelihood of being imprisoned in the U.S., depending on when a person was born (%)



Source: Bureau of Justice

Average Annual Earning for Former Inmates After Release (%)



Individuals age 18-64 in prison for at least one year as reported by states and Federal Bureau of Prisons to IRS 2009-2013 and linked to earnings and filing records 1999-2014.

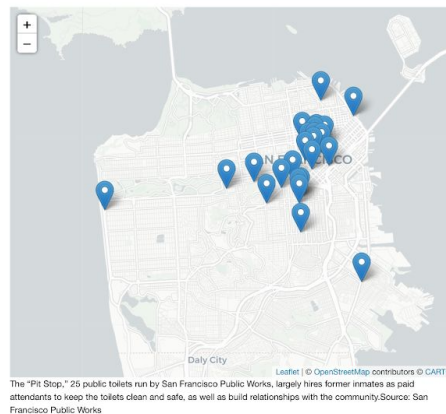
Source: The Brookings Institution

Anthony Bustos started to work for Pit Stop last year, about six months after his release from a California state prison. When the 43-year-old gained freedom after 22 years of incarceration, he wanted to open up and talk to people. He says getting the job gave him the opportunity to do that.

Bustos is among the 95% of state prisoners who won't have to spend their lives behind bars, according to the Bureau of Justice. However, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) doesn't track the employment of former prisoners. Only a few small-scale studies show their struggles: In a survey of 101 residents of West Contra Costa County who had been released within the previous 3-18 months in 2011, 78% of respondents were unemployed. Nearly all the respondents with a job were working part-time in construction, auto repair or other forms of manual labor.

Convicts are released either into state supervised parole, as was Bustos, or county-level supervision (also known as post-release community supervision), according to CDCR. The most serious and violent offenders are released to state parole, and the non-serious, non-violent, and non-sex offenders are released to county-level supervision. Parolees are assigned a parole agent and obligated to follow their agent's instructions. Former inmates who are under county-level supervision are supervised by a local law enforcement agency. Parolees account for half (49.3%) of those released from state prisons in 2017, the most recent year available, according to CDCR. Their average length of stay in prison (4.7 years) is almost four times greater than that for those under county-level supervision (1.3 years). After their release, parolees are required to attend a "Parole and Community Team (PACT)" meeting to learn about community resources, including employment opportunities.

The location of Pit Stop toilets in San Francisco.



The Pit Stop program began in 2014 as a six-month pilot project at three locations in the Tenderloin after a community budget hearing. Students from the De Marillac Academy said that they were tired of having to navigate around human waste on their way to and from school in the Tenderloin. Nuru convened a meeting with his staff, and they came up with the idea for Pit Stop. It aimed not only to solve the community problem but also to create a pipeline for people trying to re-enter the workforce.

